

# Jerry Hagstrom



## Farm bill has an atypical player

IT'S UNUSUAL for a politician to tell his allies at the beginning of a debate that they are unlikely to achieve all their goals. But that's what Sen. Cory Booker of New Jersey did Tuesday at the Food Not Feed Summit, a Washington gathering of several hundred small farmers, ranchers, food-system workers, conservationists, and public-health and animal-welfare advocates.

The summit was organized by Farm Action, a group whose website says its members believe that “monopolistic corporate control” lies at the root of problems ranging from unfair agriculture markets and worker abuses to inhumane animal conditions and environmental degradation. The group is determined to use this year's farm bill to move the government away from subsidizing industrial-scale meat production and toward helping fruits and vegetables, cereals, and regeneratively raised livestock.

Booker acknowledged that the gathering filled only “a small room,” but he said he believes the admonition attributed to anthropologist Margaret Mead: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.”

The summit, Booker said, reminded him of the Seneca Falls Convention, the first women's rights convention in the United States. That meeting was held in 1848, but it took until 1920 for the 19th Amendment granting women the right to vote to be ratified.

The movement to transform American agriculture has time on its side because “this room is about health and well-being and vitality,” Booker told the summiters.

Critics of farm policy have the possibility of making headway in the 2023 farm-bill debate because they have their most powerful ally ever in Booker, who serves on the Senate Agriculture Committee and chairs the Subcommittee on Food and Nutrition, Specialty Crops, Organics, and Research. He is also a vegan who joked at the summit that he had gained weight eating “vegan junk food.”

Booker's profile, as a Black former mayor of Newark, is an outlier for the Agriculture Committee. But New Jersey is known as the “Garden State” and has a bigger agricultural sector, particularly in fruits and vegetables, than most people realize.

Booker said he first got interested in nutrition when he was mayor of Newark and dealing with educational underachievement and high crime rates. He credited Adam Zipkin, his director of economic development and deputy mayor, with convincing him that low-income people's diets of

unhealthy food played a role in both low scholastic achievement and crime rates.

Newark was “a food desert [with] an abundance of foods that are not good for you,” Booker said. “A Twinkie product is cheaper than an apple. We are subsidizing everything in it. You can have a Happy Meal, but the meals are not connected to happiness.”

Booker created a multi-acre farm on an entire city block in a low-income neighborhood. He loves to tell the story of visiting the farm and finding vegetables that he did not recognize and hearing from residents that eating more fruits and vegetables allowed them to stop taking some medicines. He also bought refrigerators for bodegas so they could stock

fruits and vegetables and encouraged supermarkets to locate in the city.

When he came to the Senate, Zipkin followed and told him that to achieve his goals he needed to join the Agriculture Committee, which is not considered a prestigious choice. Booker has used that position to visit farms around the country and come up with a unified theory that current agricultural policy hurts both farmers who want to grow fruits and vegetables rather than the corn and soybeans mostly used for animal feed, as well as the urban consumers

who cannot afford healthy food.

Booker's rhetoric is fiery, but he has a practical legislative agenda. His top priority is the Gus Schumacher Nutrition Incentive Program, designed to help low-income people increase their purchases of fruits and vegetables. GusNIP's budget is about \$50 million per year compared to billions for commodity subsidies, and it needs to be “scaled up,” he said. He also wants to expand crop insurance and land conservation for fruits and vegetables and help minority farmers.

Those ideas are popular, but he is likely to encounter stiff opposition to proposals for a moratorium on “factory farms,” stricter enforcement of laws to control meatpackers, and changes to other programs that favor big ag.

Booker said he's determined to use his position on the Ag Committee to show what happens when “you give a guy from Jersey a gavel,” but he told the summiters some goals may have to wait for future farm bills.

When people are trying to achieve change, “they laugh at you, then they hate you, then they join you,” Booker said. □



Sen. Cory Booker

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